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No. CCCXXXVIII.

FRENCH'S MINOR DRAMA.

THE ACTING EDITION.

FOR HALF A MILLION

A Play in One Act.

BY

CLARA HARRIET SHERWOOD.

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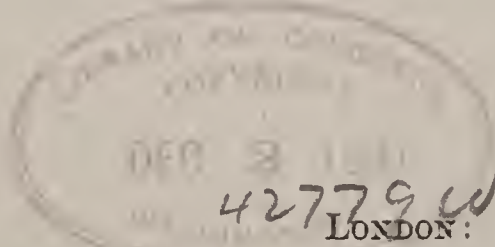
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(1891)

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FOR HALF A MILLION.

DRAMATIS PERSONÆ.

MISS MILDRED LAWTON.

MISS JULIA JONES, HER COMPANION.

MR. HARRINGTON STANLEY.

FRANCES, THE MAID.

MODERN COSTUMES.

FOR HALF A MILLION.

SCENE.—MISS LAWTON'S library. *That young woman discovered in a dainty morning gown, seated at a table covered with papers. Her head is bowed on her hands, and her attitude portrays hopeless despondency. MISS JONES, her companion (a woman several years her senior), is busily arranging photographs and dusting cabinet.*

MISS LAWTON. (*With tragic melancholy.*) Julia, it has come at last!

MISS JONES. What?

MISS LAWTON. The long-expected blow has fallen at last, and you see me crushed, my youthful hopes blasted! my young life wrecked!

MISS JONES. What on earth do you mean, Mildred?

MISS LAWTON. (*Holding up a letter.*) It came this morning, Julia, and who would believe that an innocent looking envelope like that could contain a power that would absolutely obliterate my claim to half a million dollars?

MISS JONES. (*Excitedly.*) Mildred! What are you driving at? Don't jest in that absurd way.

MISS LAWTON. (*Springing suddenly to her feet.*) Jest! Do you call that jesting? This, Miss Jones, is a letter from—shall I say it?—from my fiancé, Mr. Harrington Stanley. Read it—and tell me how you envy the woman who is bound to such an unselfish, impulsive, disinterested, uncalculating individual! Ugh! See how much in love he is, and how little inclined to be mercenary!

MISS JONES. (*Tremblingly opening the sheets and reading.*) "My dear Miss Lawton.

MILDRED. (*Breaking in.*) How romantic! How lover-like! How tender!

MISS JONES. You wouldn't have wished him to call you Mildred, would you?

MILDRED. (*Indignantly.*) Of course not, Julia. He wouldn't have dared.

JULIA. (*Continuing.*) "As you are now of age, it becomes my duty in following out the wishes of my deceased father, and of your respected uncle, Mr. Lawton—

MILDRED. May he rest in peace, and may no knowledge of the life he has embittered penetrate his fanatical old skull!

JULIA. Mildred! How can you speak so shockingly!

MILDRED. Well, what business had he binding me to a man whom I shall always hate and detest.

JULIA. But you are not bound—

MILDRED. Oh, no! not bound—only a question of a paltry half a million dollars, which, to a person of my frugal tastes, can matter nothing.

JULIA. But I'm sure, dear, you've always managed to live comfortably on your income.

MILDRED. O, yes! I've managed to keep the wolf from the door. But *go on—go on.*

JULIA. (*Continuing.*) "It becomes my duty to make you an offer of marriage.

MILDRED. How clumsily he puts it. An offer of marriage! He must have been reading "Sir Charles Grandison," and I suppose I must say (*striking an attitude*), A-r-rise, Sir Knight; I cannot be your br-r-ride! Leave me!

JULIA. (*Laughing.*) You are too absurd, Mildred. How can I read the letter when you keep on so?

MILDRED. (*Dropping into a chair.*) I am silenced. Proceed.

JULIA. (*Mumbling.*) Offer of marriage, where was I? (*Aloud.*) O, yes. "You will please allow me to remind you of a few clauses in the wills of your uncle and my father.

"As you already know, our marriage was decided upon by them while we were but children; and the sum of five hundred thousand dollars (the greater part of their amassed possessions), was set aside as a wedding gift. Except the small allowance of a few thousand yearly, we were left nothing.

MILDRED. Absolutely nothing.

JULIA. (*Continuing.*) "You doubtless remember that the will specifies that the one who refuses to comply, and thus breaks the marriage contract, must relinquish all claims to the aforesaid sum of money, which is then bequeathed unconditionally to the other.

MILDRED. (*Starting up.*) Think of that, Julia! Of course, I must let him have it, for I can never, never marry him.

JULIA. Why not? He may be very nice. Didn't you like him as a child?

MILDRED. Oh, he was very different then, and we were very fond of one another. But of course were only children, and—but do finish the letter and judge for yourself.

JULIA. "For the last two years I have been traveling in Germany and Switzerland for the sake of my health, and now I trust that I am strong enough to survive the long voyage that will bring me to you." Great Heavens! Is he an invalid?

MILDRED. (*Nodding.*) Fancy me—married to an invalid. "Is your tea right, dear? How does your toast suit you?" (*I always did hate toast and tea.*) "Can't I warm this shawl for your feet, darling?" All for half a million.

JULIA. (*Laughing.*) Oh, Mildred, you could never bring yourself to it. But let me see what else he says. "If I am spared I will be with you on the 17th or 18th. Although an invalid is of necessity most quiet and undemonstrative, I have no doubt that your fresh young face will please me, and that you will be able to add greatly to my comfort and happiness.

Respectfully yours,
HARRINGTON STANLEY."

MILDRED. Did you ever hear of such impudence! Such unparalleled selfishness! Julia, I can never marry such a man, and I cannot bear the thought of letting him pocket that half a million. Oh, why was uncle Richard such an idiot? Such an uneonscionable old fossil!

JULIA. (*Thoughtfully.*) It isn't fair. Half of that money is yours by right. Don't you suppose you could compromise, and divide?

MILDRED. He wouldn't divide. He wants it all. Besides, "It is not so nominated in the bond." We couldn't go against the will, you know. O, Julia, *Julia*, what shall I do?

JULIA. (*Her face half perplexed, half smiling.*) Mildred, I have an idea.

MILDRED. (*Affecting surprise.*) No—really?

JULIA. Yes—a wicked idea.

MILDRED. No, Julia, I might be seduced into believing that you had an *idea*; but a wicked idea—never!

JULIA. But after all, it is fair. Yes, I think you would be perfectly justified. I'll tell you what it is (*in a confidential whisper*). When he comes you must not act like yourself. Be fretful, disagreeable, unnatural, and perhaps he might refuse to marry *you*.

MILDRED. (*Catching JULIA around the waist.*) Jule, you angel! You veritable *Jewel*. What would I do without you?

JULIA. What would *I* do without *you*?

MILDRED. O, if you didn't have me to advise and look after, you would probably astonish the world by some erudite treatise on Philosophy or Metaphysics. There is an immense amount of wisdom in that little head of yours. Like Monte Cristo, "The world is mine!" likewise the half a million, and with you, sweet girl, will I divide the spoils.

JULIA. Don't be too certain, dear; for once your face and figure are against you. He may take you with all your foibles.

MILDRED. (*Starting suddenly.*) Julia! A plan is unfolding in my brain. I will disguise my face and figure. I will paint, powder, court plaster, etc. I will be *gorgeous*! Let's practise on it now. You must help me, Julia. Send Francess for some ribbons and sashes and things, and all my jewelry. We will have to buy some rouge.

JULIA. There is some here in this drawer, I think, left from the tableaux.

MILDRED. O! and a peneil for the eyebrows. How fortunate. Where is a looking glass? (*JULIE gives her one*). Thank you. Now you put it on for me. I am a novice in the art. Put it on thick, Julia. (*Looking at herself, while JULIA plies the paint.*) There! that will do. Now black my eyebrows. O, *don't* put my eyes out. Give it to me, please (*carefully blacking eyelids*). There! (*rising and making a flourish with her hands*) do I look sufficiently like a—circus rider?

(*Maid brings in sashes, ribbons, etc.*)

JULIA. Now this sash is just the thing. It is too atrocious with your gown. (*Both laugh as she ties it on*).

MILDRED. And this cape. It must be thrown on with a stagy air. So. Do you know, Julia, I believe I would make a splendid actress

(*stalking across the room*). "And what, fellow, is your business here? Avaunt, villain! never darken me doors again!" (JULIA *laughs heartily*.)

MILDRED. (*Breaking off in the midst of a magnificent gesture*.) But where are my jewels?

JULIA. Here, you ridiculous creature.

MILDRED. (*Drawing herself up and flinging cape over her shoulder*.) "And this to me? he said, an 'twere not for thy hoary beard'" (*both burst out laughing and MILDRED drops into a chair*). O, give me all the rings and pins you can find. I wish my ears were pierced, and I would hang these huge hoops in them. Julia, shall I pierce them?

JULIA. No, silly; I believe you would put "a ring in the end of your nose," like the pig in the wood, for the sake of scaring this poor invalid.

MILDRED. That would be almost like biting off my nose to spite my face, wouldn't it? But never mind. I will make up for it by putting this large cameo ring of uncle Richard's on my thumb.

JULIA. (*Laughing*.) O, that is too absurd. Put it on your first finger.

MILDRED. No, I will put another on my first finger. Find me a big one for my middle finger. There! (*Holding up her hand*.) If this lily white hand, laden with precious stones, doesn't charm him. Put some chains round my neck, Julia. You will never make your fortune as a lady's maid. How do I look? (*Striking an attitude*.) Charming?

(JULIA *drops into a chair laughing*.)

How shall I greet him? You stand over there, Julia, and act as much like a selfish, decrepid invalid as possible.

JULIA. (*Walks over to the spot designated, looks at MILDRED, and bursts out laughing*.) Oh, I can't. You look too funny. (*Falls into her chair again*.)

MILDRED. Julia, it is very evident that you will never make your fortune as an actress, either. I regret to say that your sphere is becoming extremely limited, Miss Jones. That chair will have to impersonate Mr. Harrington Stanley. (*She catches up a shawl and pins it around the chair*.) He's an invalid, you know. (*Puts a hat on the back*.) No, (*taking it off again*.) Hats off in the presence of ladies. (*Walking backwards and considering*.) How shall I address him? (*Suddenly advancing with outstretched hands, and a broad smile*.) How d'ye do, Harrington; how are you? Awfully glad to see you. Come back to marry me? How's that, Jule?

JULIA. Oh! That's terrible, Mildred. I can't bear to think of your acting *that way*.

MILDRED. (*Walking back to her starting place once more*.) Well, how will *this* do? (*Throwing her head back sentimentally, and waving her arms before her*.) Dearest Harrington, Welcome—welcome home.

JULIA. (*Laughing still more*.) That might prove irresistible, Mildred.

MILDRED. Well, you are hard to suit. Suppose I walk right up

to him like Mike, the stable boy, and say, Well, how air ye, Misther Harrington? *Will ye hev me, or won't ye. Speak de wor-rd.*

JULIA. Oh! You incorrigible. (*Some one knocks at the door.*) JULIA goes. *A card is handed in.*)

MILDRED. Mr. Harrington Stanley! (*They stand looking at each other aghast.*)

JULIA. (*Running to table and consulting letter.*) He says 17th or 18th; this is the 18th. I never thought of it.

MILDRED. Nor I. What shall I do. I can't see him like this.

JULIA. But remember his letter. Do you want to marry him?

MILDRED. (*Gasping.*) No—no. I will see him. I am just unnerved for the moment. Stand by me, Julia; oh, what shall I say? How shall I act?

JULIA. Wait a minute. Frances has put him in the parlor. I will peep in and see what he looks like. (*She rushes out.*)

MILDRED. (*Examining herself in the glass.*) What a fright! I may scare him to death. Not a bad idea. (*Smiles. Picks up letter and reads.*) “Your fresh young face will please me. (*Looks in the glass and laughs.*) “You may be able to add greatly to my comfort and happiness.” Selfish, detestable old thing! Nothing is too bad for him. I will deceive him, disgust him. My mind is made up.

JULIA. (*Entering breathlessly.*) Oh, my dear, you cannot marry him. He looks as though he could make an angel miserable.

MILDRED. (*Majestically.*) Tell Frances to show him in here. Julia, I am playing a desperate game. For heaven's sake, stand by me.

[*Enter MR. STANLEY, leaning on a cane and crutch, wearing blue goggles, and looking the picture of a consumptive.*]

MILDRED. (*Advances boldly, hesitates, and then, with a forced laugh.*) Why, Harrington, I'm glad to see you, though you have changed since we last met. Let me make you acquainted with my friend, Julia Jones.

(MR. STANLEY *essays to speak, but breaks into a fit of coughing, and only bows.*)

MILDRED, (*Starting back, then with sudden resolution.*) Gracious! What a cold you've got! But we'll soon cure that. You mustn't be so formal with Julia, for you'll get to know her pretty well before long. She lives with me. But do sit down, Harrington, you must be awfully tired. Not in that chair. Oh!

(MR. STANLEY *sits down in the chair that had impersonated him but a moment before, and both girls burst out laughing.*)

MR. S. May I inquire the cause of this extraordinary mirth? (*Coughs violently.*)

MILDRED. (*Gasping out between her laughs.*) He is sitting on himself.

MR. S. (*Looking solemnly from one to the other, aside.*) Heavens! I could never stand this. Such conduct I never heard of. (*Aloud.*)

Ah, well ; (*coughs*) it is a great pleasure to know that there are (*coughs*) some in the world who enjoy life. (*Coughs.*)

MILDRED. (*Controlling her laughter with difficulty.*) Don't you enjoy life ?

MR. S. Life ? Can any one enjoy a life made up of many sleepless nights, and days of pain ? (*Coughs.*) Days when the slightest sound jars on the ear like (*coughs.*)

MILDRED. (*Flippantly.*) Are you often affected in that way ? I suppose you retire to some sequestered nook out of the noise and bustle of this busy world, as Shakespeare says—it was Shakespeare, wasn't it, Jule ? (*JULIA goes off into silent convulsions behind MR. STANLEY.*) She knows everything, Harrington, everything.

MR. S. Indeed ? (*Coughs.*) When I am thus attacked, I require some one to rub my head or perchance, to fan me. (*Coughs violently.*) To be sure there are days when I can play my flute. (*Coughs.*)

MILDRED. (*Aside.*) Flute ! This is the last straw.

MR. S. We may be able to play some (*coughs*) some duets together.

MILDRED. (*Making a grimace.*) Yes.

MR. S. (*Aside.*) This is becoming decidedly monotonous. I will come to the point. (*Aloud.*) Miss Lawton, I have taken this long journey to see you. All winter I have been in Carlsbad and Baden Baden for (*coughs*) for my health.

MILDRED. Feel that it agreed with you ?

MR. S. Well (*coughs*) no, not exactly. The doctors are not over encouraging.

MILDRED. Don't think there's any immediate danger, do they ?

MR. S. (*Aside, I wont let her think I'll die soon. Aloud.*) O dear, no. (*Coughs.*) I may die at any time, but will probably live to be eighty, and never be in better health than I am to-day. (*Coughs.*)

MILDRED. Gracious ! You don't say so !

MR. S. And, as you see, I am wearing glasses for—for my eyes. (*Coughs.*) Are your eyes good ? I like to have some one read to me at night when I can't sleep. (*Coughs.*)

MILDRED. Yes, my eyes are very well, thank you ; but I don't care much for reading—especially reading aloud. May be Julia'd do it for you.

MR. S. I should expect my wife (*coughs.*)

MILDRED. Wives don't always come up to your expectations, you know.

MR. S. (*Aside. I'll make one more desperate attempt.*) Miss Lawton, I have come here, as you know, for the purpose of offering myself—such as I am—to you. Think well before you bind yourself for life to me, who will require all your time and thought. (*Coughs violently.*)

MILDRED. I don't mind sick people ; I'm used to them. They don't bother me a bit. I dare say I'd get used to your coughing before long.

MR. S. (*Aside. Great Scott ! How that girl has changed. I can't stand this. I may as well give it up and have done. Aloud.*) Miss Lawton (*rising*) I should feel criminally to blame, should I allow you to tie your blooming young life to one so worthless as mine. I refuse, for this reason, to marry you. The property therefore is yours. I wish you good morning.

MILDRED. (*Stunned, but recalling herself.*) But you must stay to dinner. I insist. I will not take no for an answer. You are unable to go further. James, show Mr. Stanley to his room.

MR. S. (*Bowing.*) If you insist.

[*Exit.*]

MILDRED. (*Wringing her hands and almost in tears.*) Oh, what have I done! what *have* I done!

JULIA. Mildred, how could you be so heartless?

MILDRED. Don't speak to me like that, Julia Jones. Who put me up to it, I should like to know? O, Julia! Julia! I have been dishonorable! I have cheated that poor invalid! I have lowered myself to that level of a—a circus rider for half a million dollars! And O, I don't want the money! I won't take it. (*Tearing off the chains from her neck, and the rings from her fingers.*) Take these things away, Julia; throw them out of the window—anywhere! I never want to see them again. This ring won't come off my thumb. Oh, dear, dear! Julia, why did you make me do it?

JULIA. Now you know I didn't suppose you would act so——

MILDRED. Unmaidenly! Say it. Unmaidenly. That's what you mean. Don't let any fear of hurting my feelings keep you from speaking freely, Miss Jones. (*Tearing off her sash and cap.*) Throw these away, too. And (*seeing herself in the mirror*) for goodness sake, get me some water, and let me get off some of this abominable stuff.

(*JULIA brings a bowl of water.*)

MILDRED. (*Rubbing her face vigorously.*) I must see him (*pauses and looks in the glass*) and tell him—is it coming off, Julia?—that I will not take the money. I will tell him (*rubs harder*) how ashamed (*dabs at her face*), how humiliated (*dabs again*), how detestable I am. Julia, this is never coming off, *never!* I knew you were putting it on too thick.

JULIA. But you told me to.

MILDRED. O, yes, blame everything on me, Julia. Don't spare me. I deserve it all.

JULIA. (*Embracing MILDRED.*) Now, Mildred, dear, I wasn't blaming you. I think you acted perfectly properly—that is—I—at least—well, he had no business writing such a nasty letter.

MILDRED. (*Embracing JULIA.*) Oh, Julia, you are too sweet for anything! Do you really think I wasn't too horrible?

JULIA. You could't be horrible, if you tried, dear.

MILDRED. And you are lovely. But don't you really think I had better confess? I can't let him have that impression of me. Besides, Julia, that half a million would weigh on my mind till it drove me mad, and I would go wandering about at night crying "Out, damned spot!" (*Rubbing her cheeks.*)

JULIA. (*Laughing.*) If it is going to make such a Lady Macbeth of you, by all means confess before it is too late. And to tell the truth, Mildred, I felt awfully sorry for the poor fellow. He looked so shocked and disappointed. And he had come from so far, too.

MILDRED. O, there isn't a minute to lose. Quick, Julia, dear, before my evil heart gets the better of my good resolution. Please tell Frances I wish to speak with Mr. Stanley immediately.

JULIA. Do you want me to stand by you?

MILDRED. (*With resignation.*) No, I had best bear the blow alone.

[*Exit JULIA, and enter MR. STANLEY unobserved.*]

MILDRED. (*Arranging her hair before the glass.*) What shall I say to him. (*Clasping her hands.*) Mr. Stanley, I have come to apologize. (*Turns toward the chair, which still holds the hat and shawl, and bursts out laughing.*) O, how funny it was when he sat down on his own image. (*Laughs again.*) But how cruel of me to laugh at the poor fellow, when he is so ill, and how unpardonably rude, in my own house. (*Pauses and sighs.*) Well, Julia laughed too. And I believe almost any girl would have acted as I did, if she *could*—after such a hateful letter as he wrote. And it did seem too mean that he should get that half a million. But he *must* take it now. I will never touch it. But I supposed he was very different, from that letter, or I would never have done it. How nice he used to be. How could he change so in ten years? (MR. STANLEY, *who has been listening intently removes his goggles.*) What a pity that he is halt, maimed and blind. (MR. STANLEY *puts his crutch against a chair, and stands erect.*) But there is something I like about him in spite of his coughs and goggles. If he had a nice disposition, and didn't play the *flute* (*shrugs*) the *flute*, of all things! Fancy, in the dead of night! (*Plays an imaginary flute, and hums "The Last Rose of Summer."*) (MR. STANLEY *with difficulty restrains his laughter.*) But he is very well bred, and his manner of replying to my arrogance. Oh! How I detest myself. I wonder if all that rouge is off. (*Runs to the glass and rubs her face.*) Let me see. (*Rubbing her face.*) Mr. Stanley, I assure you that never in my life have I committed a folly so sincerely regretted. Take back your fortune. All my life will be spent in repentance. The dye of sin is upon me (*looks at her hands*), and I am covered with confusion and rouge. (*Pauses and smiles.*) O, I wish he had come and it was all over. How *can* I make him understand! (*Whirls around suddenly, and discovers MR. STANLEY without goggles or crutches. She starts back in blank amazement.*)

MR. S. (*Advancing.*) No explanation is necessary.

MILDRED. Where are your cr—crutches—your c—coughs, and your g—goggles?

MR. S. Gone. A miraculous cure has been perfected in me. I entered this room blind, to some things at least, and a cripple; and now you behold me a well man.

MILDRED. (*Stammeringly.*) And you—you—O, I see it all now. You have deceived me. You played the part of a miserable invalid in the hope that I would refuse you. How disappointed you must have been to lose that half a million. But let me set your mind at rest, Mr. Stanley. You have not lost the money. It is yours, *I* will never touch it.

MR. S. (*Smiling.*) I fear you judge others by yourself, Miss Lawton. At any rate you misjudge me. I own I owe you an apology for that beastly letter, and for my subsequent conduct, as well. But let me explain. All my life, though I have seen you but seldom, I have loved you, and looked upon you as my future *wife*, according to the dearest

wish of my father. My aunt left me a fortune, which rendered me independent. So you may know that, however contemptible my actions have been, it was from no mercenary motives that I disguised myself as I did. The truth is, I wanted to see what your real character was.

MILDRED. (*Sarcastically.*) I trust you were pleased with the result of your investigation.

MR. S. Oh, I know now, what a fool, what an idiot, I have been. I am not trying to justify myself. I am merely explaining. Ten years is a long time, and I didn't know how you might have changed during that period. I wanted to know something about the woman with whom I hoped to spend the rest of my life—wanted to see whether you would accept me as I was—or pretended to be—for the sake of *half a million*. That is the truth of the matter. Of course, when I saw what you were——

MILDRED. (*Still sarcastic.*) When you saw what I was, you thought my “fresh young face” and “blooming life” entirely too “fresh” and “blooming” to be bound to yours.

MR. S. When I see what you *are*, Mildred, I can only beg you to forgive me. I can only say that I love you—love you more than I ever believed possible, and that the rest of my life will prove it, if——

MILDRED. Why, this is almost as sudden as your cure.

MR. S. Ah, no! It is but the completion of the thought of a life time.

MILDRED. (*Hesitating.*) But I hardly know you,—and you—you——

MR. S. No, I don't play the flute.

MILDRED. (*Confused.*) Oh! I didn't mean that.

MR. S. (*Smiling, and taking her hand.*) And you won't have to make toast and tea.

MILDRED. Who told you?

MR. S. (*Laughing.*) So that really did trouble you. (*Earnestly.*) But I would take such good care of you, dearest.

MILDRED. (*Moving away.*) No, I could never marry a man who had deceived me.

MR. S. But I could marry a *woman*, who had deceived *me*.

MILDRED. *Could* you?

MR. S. If I might. I understand why you acted so. I might have known it, after that abominable letter.

MILDRED. I should think you could have told that I was playing a part.

MR. S. I should think *you* could have told that *I* was playing a part.

MILDRED. But *I* was so busy acting.

MR. S. And so was I. But that is all over now. It is no longer a question of half a million, for that is yours anyway. You know I love you, Mildred,—say that you are mine—say that you will marry me.

MILDRED. (*Mischievously.*) For the sake of your father, or my uncle, this time?

MR. S. For *my* sake, Mildred. Say you will, for my sake. (*Pressing her hand.*)

MILDRED. Oh, I couldn't.

MR. S. (*Starting back.*) Is this your final answer?

MILDRED. Yes, and you will have to take the money.

MR. S. No, I never will.

MILDRED. But—but that isn't fair; half of it is yours.

MR. S. Nevertheless, if you refuse me, I shall not touch the money.

MILDRED. Then unless I—a—then I am—a—cheating you out of, let me see (*counts on her fingers*) \$250,000.

MR. S. (*With mock gravity.*) Yes.

MILDRED. And your father—and—and my uncle—a wanted—a——

MR. S. (*Grasping both her hands.*) Not half so much as I do, darling.

[*Enter JULIA aghast, looking from one to the other.*]

JULIA. O, I beg your pardon!

MILDRED. (*Snatching away her hands.*) He's been resuscitated, Julia.

MR. S. And she's going to be——

MILDRED. Sh! I didn't say so, did I? What would you do, Julia? He isn't an invalid, and wouldn't be, for half a million.



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